



MAKING THE CUT

Interim report: October 2015

brap

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WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE'RE DOING

brap

brap is an equality and human rights charity that supports public, private and voluntary sector organisations to respond to the challenges associated with our society's increasing diversity. Though we work across the country, much of our focus is on supporting agencies in Birmingham to develop new, progressive approaches to promoting equality.

For more information go to www.brap.org.uk, follow us on Twitter ([@braphumanrights](https://twitter.com/braphumanrights)), add us on Facebook ([brap.human.rights](https://www.facebook.com/brap.human.rights)) or watch the videos on our YouTube channel ([BrapHumanRights](https://www.youtube.com/BrapHumanRights)).

Making the Cut

Like many people, we're apprehensive about the long term impact of austerity measures on traditionally excluded groups. Although a number of studies have been conducted to consider the impact of public service spending cuts on individuals and services, we're concerned that some of the equality implications of this are not being picked up sufficiently. In a city like Birmingham that has historically faced systemic patterns of inequality in some key public services (e.g. housing, education and employment) and is also facing higher budgetary pressures than some other localities – issues of inequality associated with austerity measures are a central and mainstream concern.

This led us to establish a project where we would draw upon the views and experiences of a range of committed local organisations working with some of the most vulnerable people in the city. This 'Making the Cut' project, funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, is helping us to generate a better understanding of the impact of local public service re-design on front line services over time (an 18 month period). Throughout the project we'll be speaking to individuals working in organisations (mainly voluntary sector – but some public sector) providing public services, in order get a better sense of the effect that successive spending reviews in Birmingham are having on the people that they help in the community.

What do we want to know?

Broadly speaking we're focusing on:

- The key equality challenges for public services in the context of public service re-design/budget cuts
- Emerging or increasing patterns of inequality that need to be addressed in the city

- The key challenges organisations are facing in supporting beneficiaries going forward

Who are we speaking to?

We've got some fantastic local organisations (including voluntary sector and public sector) involved, working on a variety of issue and with a range of people across the city, including (but not limited to)...

- Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
- Castle Vale Community Housing Association
- Jericho Foundation
- Kikit Pathways to Recovery
- SIFA Fireside
- St Pauls Community Development Trust

What happens next?

This project aims to highlight how current strategies are impacting on the most vulnerable, so we'll be keeping everyone involved in the project up to date with what we are finding from other agencies across the city. One of the benefits of this project is we'll be in a position to notice emerging patterns across the city. We'll report back on the issues and challenges organisations are facing and the concerns being raised, and this information will be shared with key stakeholders across the city. Results will also be reported back directly to policy makers within the council and other local commissioning agencies to help share 'on the ground'/qualitative information about where inequality gaps may be widening in the city.

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Surveys

So far participants have completed three online surveys (the first in October/November 2014, the second in February 2015, and the third in September 2015). Results from the September survey are summarised below:

Since the last survey (in December) has there been a change in the level or range of services you are able to provide?

Yes, fewer services offered	37.5%
Yes, more services offered	25.0%
No change	37.5%
Don't know	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	0.0%

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Further funding reductions have meant savings have had to be made by reducing or cutting services
- Vital services – work that is central to achieving the organisation’s aims – have had to be cut due to funding cuts
- For some organisations some of their services have ended and new ones have started, so overall service provision is about the same
- Grant funding has helped to start some new services

Themes similar across both surveys:

- Spending cuts are directly impacting on participants’ ability to provide services
- Essential services are closing or at risk

Other than changes to the level or range of services, has your organisation made changes in your work due to cuts in public funding since the last time we asked?

Yes	50.0%
No	50.0%
Don't know	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	0.0%

Key themes emerging from comments:

- There is so much uncertainty in funding it’s difficult to plan ahead

- Funding is increasingly short-term, this means organisations have very little time to think about preparation, marketing and delivery
- Short-term funding also means it is more difficult to meet service users' needs
- Redundancies have had to be made as a result of reduced funding

Themes similar across both surveys:

- Organisations have had to make cuts to staffing
- Short-term funding is impacting on services' organisations ability to provide services which have a long-term impact on beneficiaries.

Has there been a noticeable change in the demand for your service since the last time we asked?

Increase in demand	37.5%
No significant change	50.0%
Decrease in demand	0.0%
Don't know	12.5%
Prefer not to answer	0.0%

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Increase in numbers of people using services, and increased demand from new client groups
- In particular demand on services is higher in areas where other organisations or services have closed
- Beneficiaries present with multiple and more complex needs, as other services which would previously have been able to offer additional support are now closed
- Higher demand for services at the weekend
- Expect demand for benefits advice to increase again soon, e.g. with changes to the Independent Living Fund planned

Themes similar across both surveys:

- Cuts elsewhere are creating increased demand on remaining services
- As well as a generally higher demand for services there is increasing demand from new groups and people presenting with more complex needs.

(If there has been a change) Why do you think demand has increased or decreased?

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Greater need e.g. increases in poverty, homelessness and hunger (e.g. creating increased need for food banks)
- Other services reducing or closing means there are fewer places for people to turn to for support

Both of these are themes which have emerged from previous surveys.

What do you think could be the long-term implications of the current policy of spending cuts (particularly for traditionally excluded groups)?

Key themes emerging from comments:

- The gains organisations have made for their beneficiaries are at risk as all sectors tighten their belts
- Current policy has the potential to have serious costs later, as issues that could be solved relatively easily spiral into crisis situations, requiring more costly intervention down the line because it didn't get the funding it needs now
- Traditionally excluded get more excluded, stigmatised, and alienated
- Poverty, homelessness, inequality and social exclusion are becoming acute problems, and current policies will continue to increase pressure on families, meaning these problems will only continue to grow
- Services will continue to reduce, leaving people with fewer ways out of difficulties

Any additional comments:

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Concerns about the future of small organisations, and the potential consequence of losing grass-roots activism, local community knowledge, and beneficiary involvement in services
 - there is increasingly a move among commissioners towards funding consortia and smaller organisations are less likely to have the capacity or networks which would enable them to join consortia and bid for funding
 - they're less likely to have the structures, systems and policies in place which are increasingly required by funders
 - they may find it harder to adapt their services to meet changing strategic priorities of funders
- There seems to be an increased focus on reducing demand, rather than meeting people's needs
- Increased competition for funding creates challenges for partnership working
- Funding is reactive, trying to 'solve' problems often by recycling ideas used before, rather than working on doing things differently and investing in innovation
- However, some organisations are using the pressure of a lack of funding as a drive to try creative new ways of working, this could be an example of good practice for the city as a whole

WHAT IT MEANS

So far we've got feedback from Making the Cut participants about the impact of local public service re-design on organisations providing public services by asking them to complete three online surveys and also having a longer conversation about the project. Taking all of this together, it is clear that increasing demand for services is not slowing, and organisations are struggling to keep up.

The three main themes that stand out from the responses discussed in this report are...

1. SPENDING CUTS DIRECTLY IMPACTING ON ABILITY TO PROVIDE SERVICES

This continues to come up – demand has increased, and continues to:

- Cuts mean that services are reducing and organisations are closing, increasing demand on those remaining
- Cuts continue to impact directly on households, driving up need for services
- As well as demand in general increasing, new groups of people are requiring support, for example LGBT asylum seekers
- Service users increasingly present with multiple and complex needs

“People we see have more complex problems and multiple problems due to lack of services to address these issues... [and] there are fewer services available due to cuts so people have fewer agencies to turn to for support”

2. SHORT-TERM FUNDING MAKES IT HARDER TO PROVIDE SERVICES

Funding is increasingly short term, which is presenting challenges to organisations' ability to provide the services people need:

- It's harder to have a real impact on beneficiaries in the short time that projects now run for – particularly given the increasingly complex issues organisations are having to respond to
- It's also difficult to have a lasting impact – funding for short-term projects is not enough to really deal with complex problems like poverty, homelessness, and inequality. More funding needs to be made available for the long-term
- Not only is funding short-term, but organisations are being informed about decisions later, meaning their ability to plan and prepare for projects is reduced because the time between being told you've got the funding and the end of the project is so short time they need to work at break neck speed just to get the work done

“Funding from a range of funders is also invariably very short term with a fast turnaround from notification of a successful application to the end of the project (sometimes 6 months

in total). This makes recruitment and bedding in projects very difficult and makes impact for clients difficult given short term projects”

3. THE FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN

At present it’s uncertain how the voluntary sector can continue to meet demand and bear the brunt of funding cuts. A number of concerns about the future were raised, most significantly:

- The prospects for small organisations, which face particular barriers to gaining funding in the current environment

“This may lead to a strengthening and standardising of the medium to large sized organisations and a demise of the smaller ones with the knock-on effect of losing grass-roots activism, innovation and service user control”

- The long-term implications on vulnerable and traditionally excluded groups

“We continue to have concerns about the long-term implications of spending cuts on individuals”

“I think there are some real time bombs ticking away. In my view the inevitable consequence of the most recent round of budget cuts will be increased crime, homelessness, inequality and social exclusion”

In summary...

Again we’ve heard that demand for services is increasing, while funding cuts are leading to reductions in staff and services – simply put, voluntary and public sector organisations are still having to do more with less.

The increasing tendency of short-term funding is of particular concern for voluntary and public sector organisations. Many of the people that are supported by organisations that participated in this survey have complex needs that can’t be met in a few months. Those organisations are facing higher demand for services, and as service providers in the city face higher pressure, those that remain will face even higher demand. Voluntary sector organisations, like any organisation, need time to plan, prepare, market and recruit for projects in order for them to be as successful as possible. Also, for money to be spent well in this area, organisations need to make sure they’re learning what works well and what doesn’t. But this kind of monitoring and evaluation takes time and funds, both of which are thin on the ground and not always prioritised in the current environment.

In short, increasingly common funding practices, such as only funding consortia and short-term funding could turn out to be a false economy. Many organisations feel that these approaches are simply putting off the problems until a later date, or worse, allowing issues to build until they reach crisis point at some time in the future. As one participant said “I think the spending cuts have the potential to be catastrophic and cause longer term costs down the line”. The dystopian picture presented by some we spoke to is of organisations shrinking or closing under the pressure of funding cuts. But it’s not all doom and gloom. Some survey participants spoke about getting new grant funding for their work, or the pressure to work better and faster leading to innovation or partnership working. The resilience of the voluntary and public sectors in the city continues to shine through, despite these pressures.

Many of those we have spoken to as part of this process are entirely realistic and pragmatic about the massive budget cuts the city is facing over the coming years. Yet the hope is that those commissioning and working with the most vulnerable and excluded in the city find better ways to communicate which services are effective and why, understand where there is duplication in services and break down invisible boundaries between providers to deliver more holistic services to those that need it. This will require a better understanding of the cumulative impact of current welfare reforms and public service delivery models on traditionally excluded groups in the city. It will also require more honest and powerful communication between (and within) the voluntary and public sectors on topics of commissioning, poverty and inequality. A challenge that many we have spoken to as part of this project are entirely willing to try.

October 2015

brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.



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